

“Cash is king...except when it’s not”

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; I Timothy 6:17-19; Luke 17:11-19

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A guy in a taxi wanted to speak to the driver so he leaned forward and tapped him in the shoulder. The driver screamed, jumped in the air and yanked the wheel over. The car mounted the curb, demolished a lamppost and came to a stop inches from a shop window.

The startled passenger said, “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I just wanted to ask you something.” The taxi driver responded. “It’s not your fault, sir. It’s my first day as a cab driver. For the last 25 years I’ve been driving a hearse.”

We laugh at death for many reasons but one is because our time will come. In that light this sermon has one point from two perspectives.

The point is we want to live lives of meaning. I don’t know about you, but I’m really not interested in just existing. We each may define that differently, but some definitions include “going through the routine,” “paying the bills,” “doing the grocery shopping,” “meeting the expectations of others.”

Not that I am above any of these things. I do them all weekly and I imagine you do, too. They keep our lives organized, our creditors satisfied, our families fed and our relationships nurtured.

But living a life of meaning goes beyond these important basics. Before our time comes to ride in the back of the hearse, it seeks to answer Einstein’s exhortation, *“Try not to become a (person) of success but rather try to become a (person) of value.”* We measure value in many ways, I suppose; but having had two funerals this week reminds me that I tend to think of value as “What do I want people to say at my funeral?” My friend and colleague, Dr. Clayton Miller, has lived a life of such highly-regarded value that on at least two occasions the praise was so noteworthy that he told us we didn’t have to come to his funeral for we had already said all the things that might otherwise be said. And

Clayton, being Clayton, attributed it all to living a life in response to Jesus' prayer "*Thy will be done.*"

So if a meaningful life is the point of living and cultivating the same is the point of this sermon, what are the two perspectives I'm talking about? They are "Cash is king." "Except when it's not."

"Cash is king." It is one of the favorite phrases of a friend, John Cottrell, the Chief Operating Officer of The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport. John does what a COO is supposed to do: keep the operation running smoothly, effortlessly, flawlessly. He does it well, which is a key reason why The Council has weathered tough times as well as sailed through good ones. In any non-profit, including the church, promises are wonderful but cash, honestly, pays the bills. John knew this the hard way: when the Council lost a major state contract for youth services over a decade ago, he and the former CEO froze their salaries for many months until the organization's finances stabilized. It was a tremendous demonstration of organizational and mission commitment, one not lost on me as a then-member of the Board of Directors. That John is a faithful and active member of the Stratford United Methodist Church is, I believe, no accident.

"*Cash is king.*" It's the world we live in. We are surrounded by messages that cash is king. A recent television ad for Mercedes-Benz has a young man resisting a Faustian bargain with the devil who offers him the latest car. But unlike Jesus, who resisted the tempter with the Word of God, this young man is able to resist the devil because the base price of the car is only \$29,000.

Cash is king. It's the world Paul lived in, which is why he had a word for the rich in today's reading from I Timothy. The word is clear: "Except when it's not." It's not just "Don't trust riches because they are elusive and transitory," as if they are inherently evil. They're not. Probably one of the most mis-quoted passages of scripture is "Money is the root of all evil." No such declaration exists in the Good Book. But "Love of money is the root of all evil" in verse 10 of this chapter from Timothy is a word to the wise.

So Paul says instead we are to use money like any other tool: for good. If you want a life of meaning, do good. Use your money for good. Be rich in good works, some of which require cash and some of which do not. Be generous and ready to share. If you were on trial for being a Christian, and the prosecution submitted as evidence your checkbook receipts or on-line bank statements, would there be enough evidence to convict you? To convict me?

“Except when it’s not.” That’s the other part of living a life of meaning. You and I both know of people who have everything and they are either miserable, insufferable or both. Why? Because they have never learned the simple lesson of the story in the Gospel: gratitude.

But we don’t have to be rich to be ungrateful. Today’s Gospel story is a case in point. Lepers in the ancient world were quarantined, set apart from polite society to live and suffer and die where, hopefully, polite society wouldn’t see them. Poverty was their lot. In this story they came to Jesus for healing, but respectfully, keeping their distance so as not to contaminate him with their leprosy. And all ten lepers were cleansed, the text tells us. The word in the Greek is *katharizo*, to be purged or purified. All ten lepers were purged of their leprosy.

But Jesus commends the one who returns to him to give thanks. Why? Partly as a reminder, to those of us who think we have a corner on faith, that Jesus and God look at things differently. The foreigner who returned thanks was to devout Jews a religious outsider, a Samaritan, a half-breed descendant of Jews and their Assyrian captors from 700 years before. Students of the scriptures know that Jews and Samaritans hated each other, so Jesus praising this Samaritan was a reminder to the faithful of his day, as it is to the faithful of our day, that no one gets a free pass on the basis of religious pedigree. You and I are no better because we are Christian.

Even more, the Samaritan has an experience that the other lepers do not. They were *katharizo*, purified; he was *sozo*, “saved,” “delivered,” “protected.” That is the meaning of “Your faith has made

you *well*.” “*Well*” is *sozo*, the healing is spiritual beyond the physical. Salvation is possible because of gratitude.

Gratitude leads us to a place where blessing, even blessings we know we’re not entitled to, can never lead us. It leads us to that place of interdependence, away from “me” and “mine” to “us” and “ours;” and into a delightful freedom that comes when we allow our hearts to risk being appreciative because we know we can’t do it all for ourselves.

That frees us to live lives of meaning because it leaves us free to be less grasping, less calculating, less tethered to where we think the power is; and free to be open to where the real power is and allowing it to flow through us. That’s why Paul says to Timothy that the good deeds of the wealthy “*store up...the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*”

Some of you will know the name of the late William Sloane Coffin, for many years Chaplain at Yale University and later pastor of The Riverside Church in New York and a champion of the Gospel as it speak to social justice in our day. His life, by any measure, is one of meaning. Circling back to where I began, considering our life through the lens of our funeral, I end with Dr. Coffin’s reflection on his own end-of-life issues in his book Credo:

“I am less intentional than ‘attentional.’ I am more attentive to family and friends and to nature’s beauty. Although still outraged by callous behavior, particularly in high places, I feel more often serene, grateful for God’s gift of life, for the compassions that fail not. I find myself saying daily to my loving Maker, ‘I can no other answer make than thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks.’”

Credo, Westminster: John Know Press, 2004, p. 173

Cash is king. Except when it’s not. Let gratitude enable us to reflect wisely on when it is, and when it is not; and resolve to recommit our lives so that they reflect the meaning and value of Christ. Amen.